

“APPRECIATION DAY”

Matthew 17:11-19 (p. 1015)

Rev. Alan Jackson

Two weeks ago we celebrated “Pastor Appreciation Day.” And I confess that I approached that event with some apprehension. After all, there are any number of people in this church, both paid and volunteer, who deserve every bit as much appreciation as do the Men in Black. But any sense of unworthiness was washed away by the flood of kind words and cards and expressions of gratitude to God for calling the likes of us to minister among you. I know that I speak for Bruce and Chris and our wives in telling you how deeply touched and honored we were.

That happy event, and the imminent day of national Thanksgiving we’re about to celebrate, set me to thinking about those who are seldom if ever shown appreciation – and that drove me back to the Scriptures. I suspect that, sooner or later, we all have the experience of working hard on something, but then we never hear a word of appreciation, let alone acknowledgment. No cards come in the mail. There’s no phone call. Nobody takes the time to say, “*Thanks for everything.*”

When this happens there’s a residue of incompleteness. The circle doesn’t get closed. You have no way of knowing whether your efforts were helpful or unhelpful, meaningfully on-target or confusingly wide of the mark. A lack of thanksgiving leaves you feeling empty – empty in the sense of the Latin word for “empty” – *vanus* – from which we get the words “vanity” and “vain.” When what you do isn’t acknowledged, it’s easy to wonder if maybe your efforts were in vain – empty – futile. It is a very disappointing sensation to experience, isn’t it?

Now, if such instances are rare in your life – if much of what you do receives an appropriately grateful acknowledgment from others, then you can absorb occasional ingratitude with ease. Such instances may be annoying, but not finally very damaging. But if you rarely receive any thanks, the cumulative damage can be enormous, because then the sense of vain emptiness pummels your soul day after day.

Unexpressed thanks is an insidious way to hurt someone. It’s one of those “sins of omission.” A lack of thanksgiving is a passive form of verbal abuse. We know how we can wound people by what we say. But silence can be every bit as devastating. Failing to thank people is an emptiness with substance – it’s a gratitude vacuum that can suffocate. The way some people receive and receive and receive and yet never say “Thank you” is baffling – baffling, it seems, even to God.

Consider our lesson this morning. This is one of our Lord's long-distance miracles. He doesn't heal anyone on the spot, but instead tells these still-diseased men to go show themselves to the priest. We know that lepers back then were social outcasts. Jewish law required that they stay outside the community until they were cured. Once that happened, the first step back to acceptance was to be examined head-to-toe by a priest. So by telling those lepers to go show themselves to the priests, Jesus was extending them the promise of healing.

So the lepers headed for the Temple, only to discover while on the way that indeed, they had been healed. On seeing this, one of the ten ran back and threw himself at Jesus' feet in thanksgiving. Jesus responded with a triple question: "*Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to praise God except this foreigner?*" And of course, that last question was the time bomb in the narrative. The only one who expressed gratitude to Jesus turned out to be a Samaritan. The nine Jewish lepers didn't say a word. Only this lowly Samaritan came back to render proper thanks. And Jesus responded to him by saying, "*Rise and go; your faith has saved you.*"

I know the NIV translates it as "healed" – but "saved" is what the Greek word literally means. All ten lepers were "healed." But there is a hint in Jesus' final words that the one who returned to say "Thank you" may have also been "saved" in some deeper sense. Perhaps only those who properly respond to God's grace are the ones who really "get it." They are the ones who show that salvation is really working in their lives. Now, if there's anything to that line of thought, then here we have a dramatic example of the huge difference that saying "Thank you" can make. A simple, childlike gesture of politeness just might make all the difference in the world.

Now, I suppose it should be noted that the Samaritan broke the law by doing this. The law stipulated that even cured lepers weren't allowed to be around anyone without the prior permission of a priest. So the other nine lepers may not have been outwardly very thankful, but at least they were doing what was expected of them. There may be a lesson in that, too. Expressing thanks requires going beyond what's expected of us. Proper thanksgiving, as Bruce reminded us last week, should simply bust out all over. That lone Samaritan understood that offering proper gratitude to Jesus was more important than following regulations in the rulebook. He went beyond what was expected of him to cut loose with a most fitting offering of thanksgiving.

A central tenet of our Christian faith is that we live in a world that is saturated with the God's goodness. "*Give thanks to God, for he is good,*" Psalm 136 says over and over again. Every day every one of us benefits in some way from God's generosity. But we Christians take it a huge step beyond that. We believe that by pure grace God has saved us. He has already placed in us the spark

of eternal life. So it follows that, for Christians, the more we notice God's gifts in which our lives are marinating daily, the more we realize that our whole existence ought to be one huge extended act of thanking God. And how do we do that?

We show our thanks to God by living gratefully within the moral boundaries he has set up, by coloring inside the lines God sketched when he drew up the universe's blueprint. But in this season of Thanksgiving let me suggest that our debt of gratitude should issue in lives that are not only grateful to God, but are grateful across the board. The river of thanks that properly flows from us to God ought to be bubbling up in all kinds of tributaries of gratitude that flow to people around us – people who may be desperate for a little refreshing water of thanksgiving.

But to do that regularly and well requires that we go beyond what is expected of us, beyond social convention. So let me admonish you in Christ's name to be on the lookout for the chance to say "Thank you" to all kinds of people. Each time we do that, we accomplish two things. First, we affirm again that all of life is a gift and we know it. Second, we build up those people around us who enhance God's gift of life in all sorts of ways.

I want us to notice when spouses, children, parents, waiters, clerks, tellers, busboys, grocery baggers do a good job – and then offer them a word of "Thanks." So what if they are "just doing their job." If they've done it well, say so! This is far more than simply being polite the way you were raised to be by your parents. In the long run, thanking people is one of the most profoundly Christian things you can do. God wants you and me to make every day a thanksgiving day. Routinely making other people feel appreciated and special is one of the best ways we can celebrate the life God has given us.

On the other hand, one of the most effective ways of killing any joy in the people around you is to be routinely ungrateful. What may not be so obvious is that it will kill something inside you as well, and I'll tell you why. When you routinely fail to express gratitude, you gradually develop an unhealthy sense of entitlement. After a while you don't bother to say "Thank you" to certain people in your life because you feel like you deserve the service they've rendered. After all, you've earned it, you've paid your dues, you've laid down your cash, you've slaved away at your own job to make this dinner out or this vacation or this shopping spree possible. Saying "Thank you" to certain people might somehow be admitting that maybe what you're getting out of life is less an accomplishment and more part and parcel of the larger gift of God. So you never bother to say "Thank you."

In the film *"The Remains of the Day"* Anthony Hopkins played a butler in a very wealthy household. While he was researching this role, Hopkins interviewed a real-life butler. This butler told Hopkins that his goal in life was complete and

total obsequiousness – the skilled ability to blend into the woodwork of any room like a mere fixture, on a par with table lamps and andirons. In fact, Hopkins said that one sentence he will never forget was when this man summed up an excellent butler this way: “*The room seems emptier when he’s in it.*” The butler’s goal is to do his work, fill the wine glasses, clear the plates and silverware without being noticed, much less thanked. But that is precisely the effect of routine ingratitude on the people around us: it makes people disappear. But a simple word of thanks makes people visible again. It humanizes them.

“*What is the chief end of man?*” asks the Westminster Catechism. And the answer: Our primary reason for being here is “*to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*” A chief way we glorify God is by thanking Him moment by moment for the gifts He has lavished upon us. And that great big gratitude sets the tone for all of life, which means that Christians should routinely be the most polite, thankful people around. We should be on the lookout for chances to express gratitude to all kinds of people as the natural overflow of the thanks that constantly bubbles up in our hearts.

For better or worse, Thanksgiving Day in this country is a national holiday. Everybody knows we are supposed to be thankful, but strange as it may seem, some people have a hard time with that. If you don’t much believe in God, then to whom are you ultimately thankful? Lots of people feel thankful in general. But that’s a bit strange. That’s like being married in general. Marriage isn’t marriage without a spouse, just as thankfulness isn’t thankfulness without someone to thank.

Christians, of all people, know the one to whom we owe endless thanks: it’s God. The church should be like that one grateful Samaritan leper. Everyone benefits from God’s goodness and grace. But far too many people are like those nine lepers: they don’t come back to God to say thanks. Those of us in the church, however, come back. And we do so regularly because we “get it” – we understand that God is the source of all blessings. A good way to flex our thanksgiving muscles is to daily to take note of, and then lift up with a word of thanks, God’s many servants who day by day contribute to our lives.

Take a seminary class on the Doctrine of God and one of the first things you’re taught is that God is utterly self-sufficient, lacking nothing and needing nothing from any outside source. Yet throughout the Bible there are hints that somehow God is incomplete without the thanks of his people. Jesus asked, “*Weren’t there ten who were cleansed? Where are the other nine?*” Can you detect a note of divine disappointment in his question? I wonder how often God feels that way? As I said earlier, a lack of gratitude makes other people disappear. Tragically, in the long run ingratitude erases God from the picture, too.

Ten lepers asked Jesus for help. He answered their request by telling them to act as if he had already helped them. And in that simple act of obedience, all ten

found God's grace poured out. But only a tithe, one in ten, returned with thanks. Ten percent found its way back to the One who had given them all every reason to rejoice.

So, what are we to make of this story? Perhaps we can take it as a modest parable. Whether we deserve it or not, God gives us everything we need to make life good. We can go our way and enjoy it without ever acknowledging the gift – and most people do. But you and I are not “most people.” Those who turn to thank him are the ones who discover blessing upon blessing.

Let me ask you this. When it comes to thanking God for the ways he has blessed you, will ten percent find its way back to him? As for me and my house, we intend to do so for eternity. And why? The psalmist reminds us why: “*Give thanks to the Lord,*” he says, “*for He is good, His love endures forever.*”

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